General Evaluation Criteria ~ Evaluating Reference Sources

There are several things to consider when reviewing reference tools. Regardless of the format, the main criteria are authority, currency, audience, accuracy, and accessibility.

Authority. What is the reputation of the publisher? What are the qualifications or credentials of the author, editor or contributors?

H.W. Wilson, National Geographic, and World Book – these names are synonymous in the publishing world with reliability in their field. For example, H.W. Wilson provides high-quality indexing and abstracting services; National Geographic is a leading producer of map products and social science information; and World Book publishes the encyclopedia of choice for most schools. All three publishers are careful in choosing competent contributors and are conscientious in listing the qualifications of each one. If you're unsure about authorities, note the names of publishers and editors whose works you like and use; you will soon know the ones you want to rely on.

Currency. Check the copyright date (for books and electronic versions of reference books) or the most recent update (for web sites). For example, does an encyclopedia contain mention of items in the news during the past year or two? Are the newest words contained in a dictionary? Does an atlas use current names for countries? The equivalent of a recent copyright date for a web site is the indication that the site is regularly updated: has it been revised within the past three to six months? If it carries no date at all, be very cautious. Are links still current?

Remember, currency can refer to two different issues: the publication/ copyright date or last update; and currency of the content. Publication date or update is a good general guide, but the real test is, of course, in the content of the source.

A reminder: Not all subjects require equal currency. Scientific and medical information changes rapidly, and the more current the publication date, the better.   For example, a year-old *Physicians' Desk Reference (PDR)*, while perhaps not completely up-to-date, may still be relied upon. However, a three- or four-year-old edition of the *PDR* will not include changes in medical knowledge since it was issued. The publication date for works of literary criticism, history and philosophy is much less crucial – Richard Morris' *Encyclopedia of American History* (6th ed., 1982) is useful for all subjects covered up to the date written.

Audience. Who is the target audience? Is the book or web site aimed at students – and if so, what grade level? For example, three well-known encyclopedias are the *Britannica*, *Americana*, and *World Book*. Researching these three will show that *Britannica* is appropriate for senior high to adult readers, *Americana* for junior/senior high students to adults; while, *World Book* is aimed at younger readers but can be enjoyed by all ages.

Is it for the general reader, or for a more academic or technical researcher? The *New York Public Library Science Desk Reference* is written for the general reader with science questions, while the intended audience of the *CRC Handbook of Chemistry and Physics* is for professional researchers. Sources like the *McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of Science & Technology* may be used profitably by a wide range of readers. In particular, it can be useful for high school students who are preparing school reports.

Accuracy. Are the entries consistent? They should reinforce one another, not offer contradictory information. For example, if you are seeking U.S. population figures, are you consistently finding 2010 census figures, or are some of them from 2000?

One way to check for accuracy is to look up a topic you're familiar with to see if the information provided is correct. For example, in examining encyclopedias in particular, you might want to check the entry for Idaho or the city you live in. One way of checking for accuracy in web sites is by checking the links. Do they link to other reliable sites, such as a government site or reputable professional organization?

Accessibility. Is the tool easy to use? Check the book's table of contents and index; given your particular need, one or the other may be the most useful in leading you to the information you want. For example, the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* has a detailed index, and a well-organized table of contents, either of which can help you quickly locate information.

The accessibility of a web site can be evaluated by answering the question: Do the web site menu and other design features lead directly to the type of information you need? As an illustration, compare the home pages of Google and Yahoo. Note the simplicity of the Google site, especially contrasted with the Yahoo site, which contains a lot of unwanted advertising material.